

Sounding Dark

ICA Panel, 9th September 2016



*Darkcore: dub's dark legacy in Drum
'n' Bass Culture*

Key Themes

✓ Drum 'n' Bass Darkness

✓ Dark Otherness

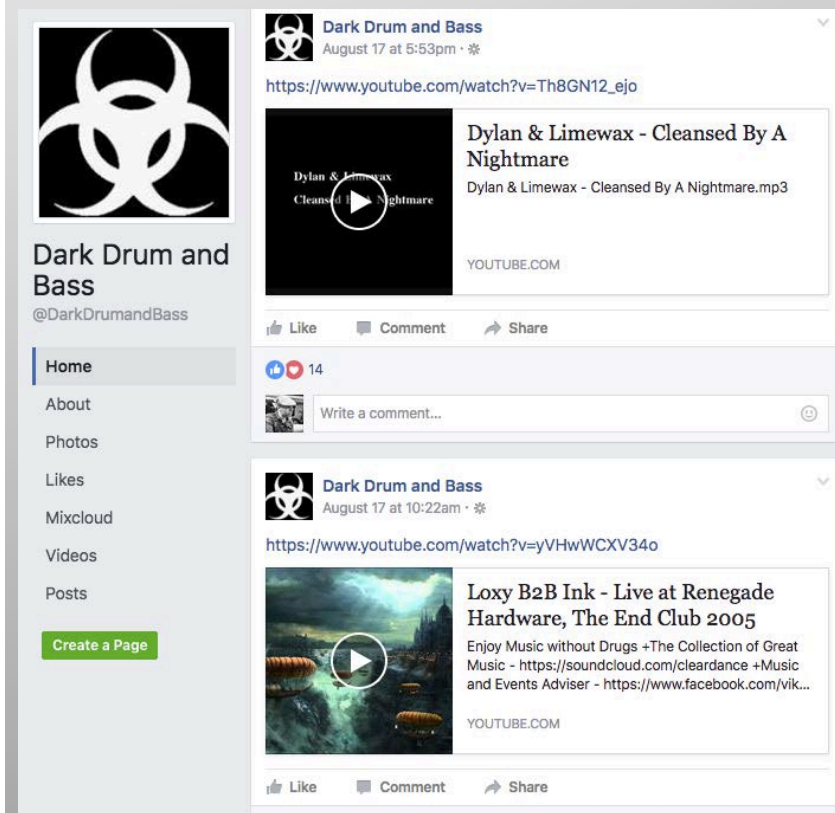
✓ Dark Futures

Talk based on: Christodoulou, Chris (2015) 'Darkcore: Dub's Dark Legacy in Drum 'n' Bass Culture', (*Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture, Echoes from the Dub Diaspora*, (2015, 7(2)).

Drum 'n' Bass Darkness

Discourses of **darkness** within jungle/drum 'n' bass culture provide an affirmative critical response to:

- The demonisation of blackness as the **post-colonial Other** of modernity;
- the difficult conditions created by the **political economy of the contemporary city** where rapidly changing relationships between **class, gender and technology** determine access to wealth and social prosperity.



The screenshot displays the Facebook profile of 'Dark Drum and Bass', which features a biohazard symbol as its profile picture. The page has a sidebar menu with options: Home, About, Photos, Likes, Mixcloud, Videos, and Posts, along with a 'Create a Page' button. Two posts are visible, both dated August 17. The first post, from 6:53pm, links to a YouTube video of 'Dylan & Limewax - Cleansed By A Nightmare'. The second post, from 10:22am, links to a YouTube video of 'Loxy B2B Ink - Live at Renegade Hardware, The End Club 2005'. Both posts include a video player thumbnail, the track name, and a link to the YouTube video.

Drum 'n' Bass Darkness

- Jungle, or 'jungle-techno', developed during 1992 as the main soundtrack to London's inner city rave scene.
- Jungle/drum 'n' bass: a mainly instrumental genre, based on a combination of **powerful bass sounds** and hip-hop-style break-beats ('breaks') that are either synthesised or digitally sampled from existing sources (funk records; sample packs, etc.);
- Breaks looped (repeated) and accelerated to around 174 BPM – around twice the speed of dub tracks.



Drum 'n' Bass Darkness

Jungle's mainstream popularity peaked in the mid-1990s;

Maintains a continued presence as part of global EDM culture in the 2010s, and in the pop charts in radio-friendly form;

Its formation can be considered a postcolonial response to the deleterious social effects of [globalisation](#) and [post-industrialisation](#), especially the growth of an [accelerated culture](#).



Drum 'n' Bass Darkness



- Initially ignored by metropolitan club culture and the mainstream music media;
- Supported in the 1990s and early-2000s by an 'underground' subculture of pirate radio stations and specialist record shops;

Kodwo Eshun, in *i-D* magazine: "(jungle) is the one music everyone agrees is no good" while "the very fact that questions of race and class come up over and over indicates unease with the music's following, who they are and what (its participants are) up to". (Issue 128, May 1994)

Drum 'n' Bass Darkness



In 1995, the music critic **Simon Reynolds** described jungle as the “first Black-British music”.

Such **hybridity** is heavily informed by cultural practices drawn from the **dub and reggae sound systems** imported to English cities from Jamaica in the 1960s and 70s (such as South East London’s Jah Shaka, pictured above), which helped to foster a sense of solidarity between ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’ on the basis of shared working class experiences.

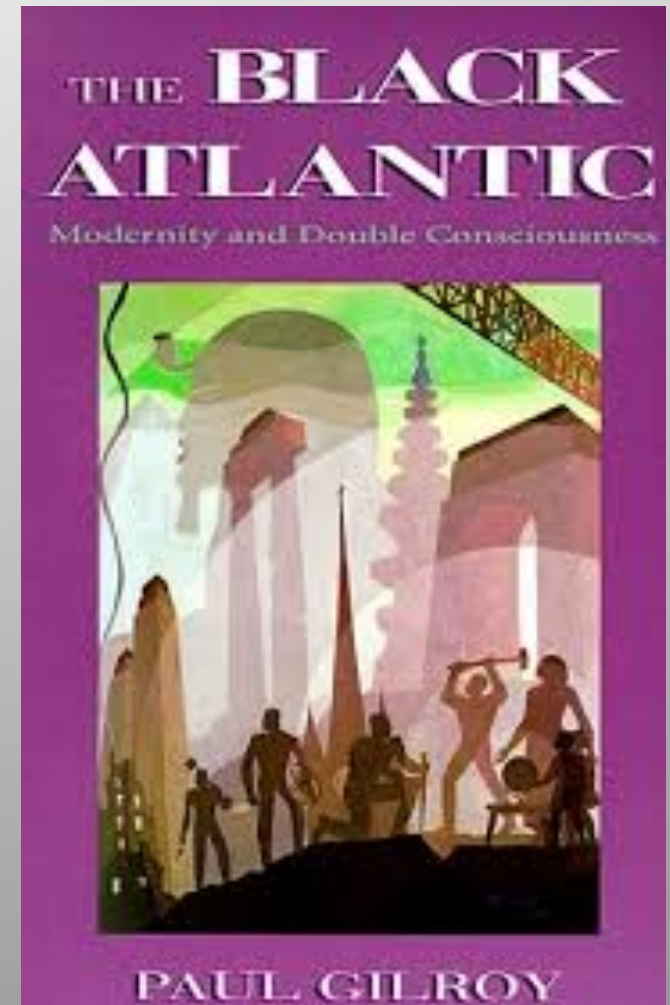
Drum 'n' Bass Darkness

Jungle's development can be considered a key example of what **Paul Gilroy** describes as the '**Black Atlantic**' (1993);

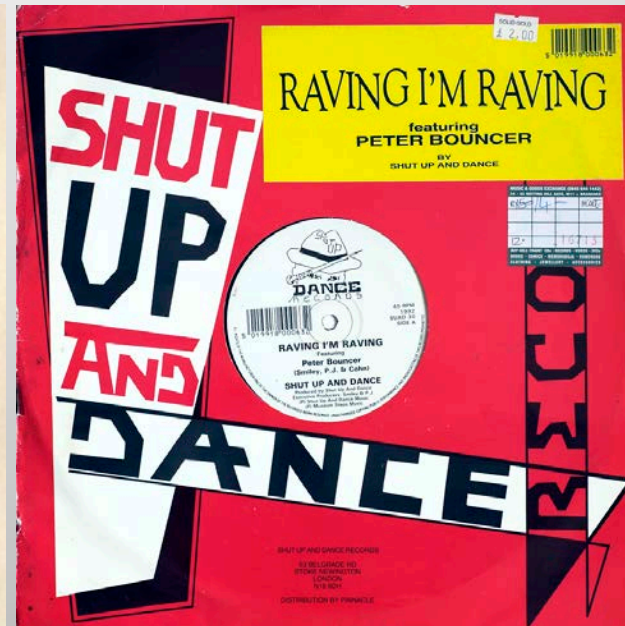
Anti-essentialist space formed out of the migrations and cultural exchanges between the US, the Caribbean and the UK;

Criss-crossed Atlantic Ocean illustrates that alongside shared experiences of historical racism, diverse cultural and geographic conditions negate the possibility that 'blackness' can exist as a racial absolute.

MC Five-O: "(jungle's) not a black or a white thing; it's a multicultural UK thing".



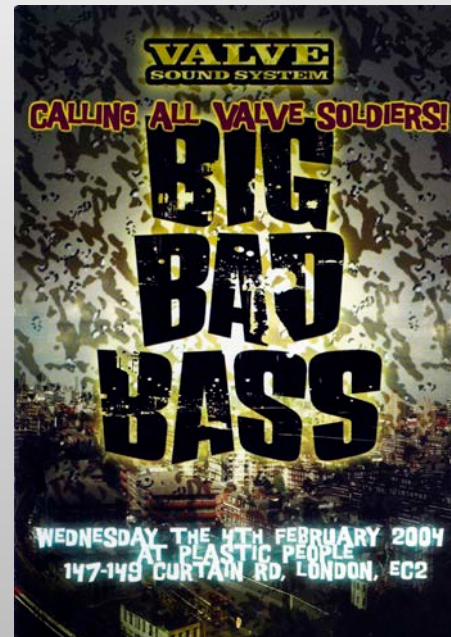
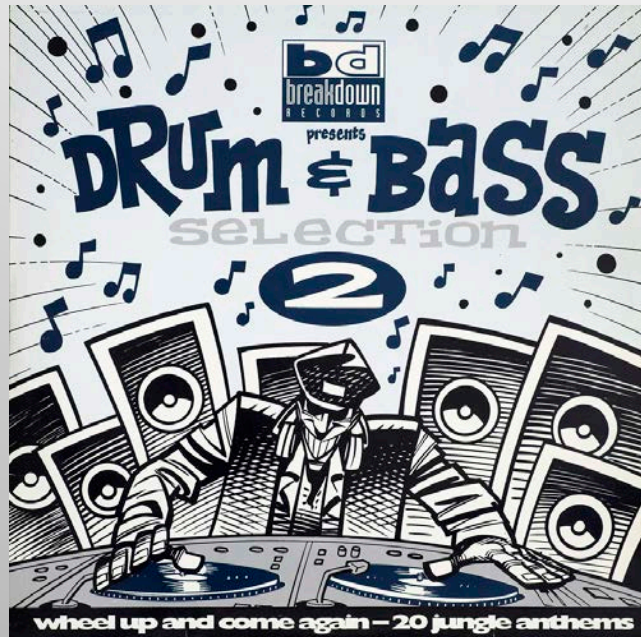
Drum 'n' Bass Darkness



The term 'jungle' remains highly charged on the basis of its ethnic darkness / blackness;

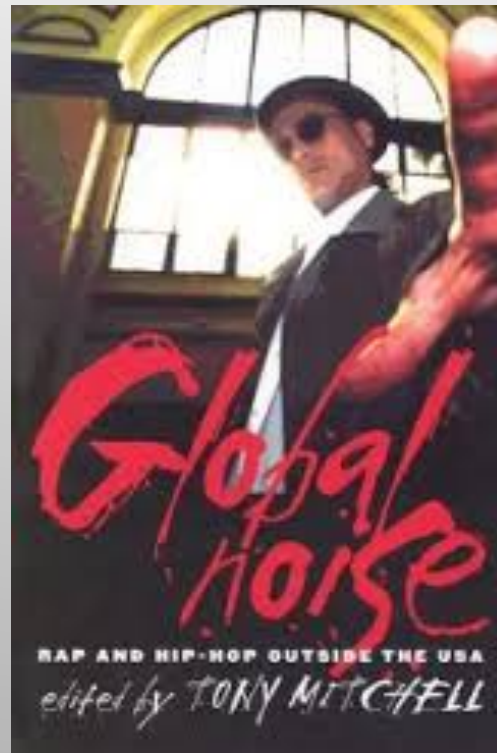
“The fact is, it’s got racist connotations, it always has. You watch old films and they say “turn off that bloody jungle music!” (Smiley of jungle pioneers **Shut Up and Dance**). Implicit in this use of ‘jungle’ is the denigration of the African-American rhythms of 1920s Harlem jazz.

Drum 'n' Bass Darkness



- By the mid-1990s, 'drum 'n' bass' became the preferred term for the jungle genre;
- Resolved ethnocentric connotations, while continuing to highlight membership within the Black Atlantic cultural continuum;
- Shares iconography and lexicology with Jamaican dub: 'drum 'n' bass' emerged as an alternative term for dub in the 1970s.

Dark Otherness



For **David Hesmondhalgh** and **Caspar Melville**, anxieties expressed in the mass media about jungle's 'darkness' were often "racist responses to a music that was defiantly 'Black', whose core market was obviously Black, and whose structure reintroduced elements of Black musical forms and practice". (2002)

Dark Otherness



For drum 'n' bass participants, being self-consciously 'dark' shows affirmative identification with the experience of [post-coloniality](#), while the thematic prominence of 'darkness' points to the neo-gothic [post-industrial conditions](#) of its inner city development.

Dark Otherness

The adoption of dub's powerful bass motif also provides a sonic signifier for the darkly futuristic discourses of drum 'n' bass culture.

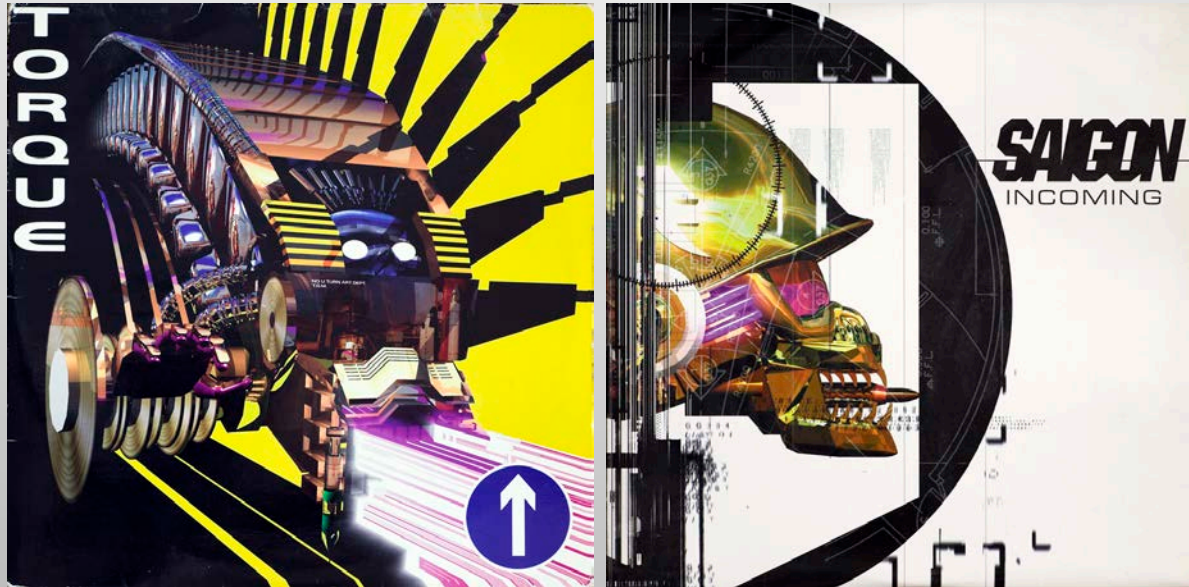
The bass-line may also be read as articulating the painful passage of forced migration across vast geographic distances.

Dub poet and activist **Linton Kwesi Johnson**; “bass history is a hurting black story”.

Bass as motif of *jouissance* (Roland Barthes' term for *both* bliss and extreme pain), prominent in Jamaican dub and UK drum 'n' bass.



Dark Futures



- Much contemporary drum 'n' bass uses futuristic sound effects and samples from dystopian science-fiction films, alongside foreboding, dub-style '[dread bass](#)' (darkstep; techstep; neurofunk, etc.);
- Combined soundscape conveys the [future as a new dark age](#) where human labour and social priorities are displaced by technology and [deindustrialisation](#).

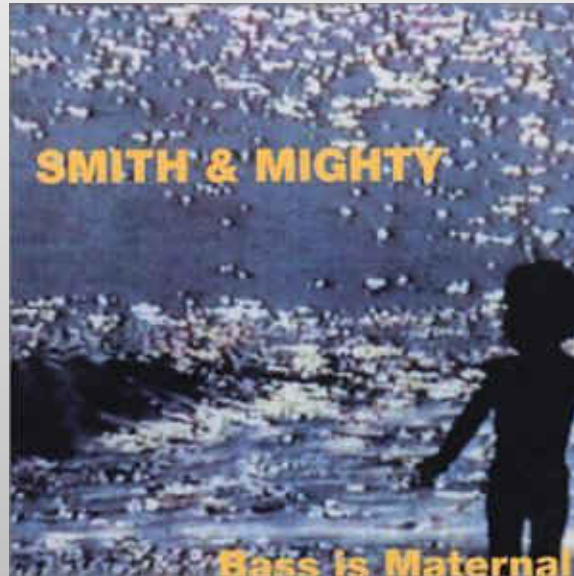
Dark Futures

Fetishistic ascriptions of darkness in drum 'n' bass also point to a desire for an **unravelling of the self** facilitated by the **heavy sonority of bass**.

Homi K. Bhabha suggests that darkness as a cultural discourse “signifies both birth and death; it is in all cases a desire to return to the fullness of the mother, a desire for an unbroken and undifferentiated line or origin”.



Dark Futures



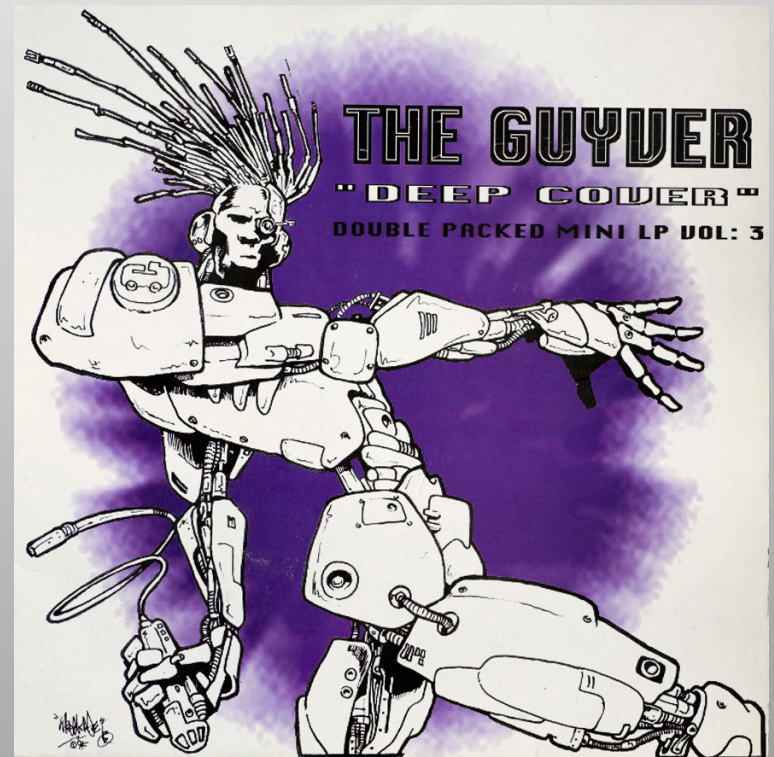
In a bass-heavy club, powerful low frequencies can also seem to animate the boundary-less bliss the child felt in the womb, its original 'home'.

An undifferentiated sense of being within the mother's body is arguably especially prominent for people with anxieties linked to living and growing-up amidst the social and economic difficulties associated with late-capitalism.

Dark Futures

Throughout the visual iconography of drum 'n' bass, the ecstatic darkness conveyed by feelings of undifferentiated union within the womb often takes the form of [technological fetishisation](#).

Such fetishisation can be seen as belonging to a long history of the eroticisation of technology as a response by male labour and cultural power to the threat of machines.



Dark Futures



In sonic terms, the womb-like ‘darkness’ of bass carries a particular significance for the [gender identity](#) of drum ‘n’ bass; the power of [technological reproduction](#) – a position it once occupied in the industrial age – is subconsciously inscribed onto the female body’s system of *biological* reproduction, thereby attracting a [largely male and working class audience](#).

Conclusion

- Darkness affirmed in drum 'n' bass culture as a motif for **post-colonial Otherness**;
- Fatalistic, gothic response to the social and economic conditions of **late-capitalism**;
- Fetishised 'darkness' of loud, dub-influenced bass is framed by a sense of **subjective unravelling**, especially in a bass-heavy club;
- Bass as a sonic signifier for the **pathology or obsolescence of the body**, especially the male working class body, in a **high-tech post-industrial** age.